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SUBJECT: UNDP'S PROGRAM IN BURMA - LINKING BASIC HUMAN
NEEDS AND BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez. Reason: 1.5 (d),

1. (C) Summary: UNDP will be seeking a more flexible mandate for its operations in Burma at the January 21 meeting in New York. The USG should support that request, but should also demand that UNDP and other UN agencies play a more active role in regard to human rights monitoring and protection on a day-to-day basis in Burma. End Summary.

2. (U) UNDP has scheduled a meeting in New York on January 21 to review UNDP's program in Burma. The centerpiece of that meeting will be an independent evaluation done in May and June, 2002 on UNDP's programs here. That assessment basically concluded that UNDP's projects in Burma are being carried out in accordance with the instructions of the Governing Council and the Executive Board. The report also concluded that UNDP's projects are having a significant positive impact on the intended beneficiaries. According to the report, UNDP's projects addressed all the critical areas mandated by the Executive Board, with a strong emphasis on the poorest segments of Burma's rural population. Moreover, most of the projects exceeded their goals and targets and all were delivered within budget. Among the most notable accomplishments were the establishment of "self care" facilities in 3700 villages involving over 370,000 women; the development of water and sanitation programs in 2400 villages; the establishment of micro-credit schemes in 11 townships; the creation of over 1000 community self-reliance groups covering more than three-quarters of the target households; and improvements in food production with the result that 80 percent of the villages within UNDP's program area are now self-sufficient in food

3. (U) For all this success, however, the assessment also notes that UNDP's programs now reach only a small percentage (about 4 percent) of Burma's rural population. The impact of projects has also been undermined by the macro-economic policy environment within which they are implemented. In addition, little has been done to deal with the devastating impact that economic shocks and natural disasters can have on vulnerable rural populations. Finally, but most seriously, the sustainability of all of all of UNDP's projects is questionable. Most are now being implemented through ad hoc structures with few, if any links, to national institutions, such as the national health and education services. As a result, there is a real question as to how many will survive, if and when UNDP funding is cut off. The assessment traces several of these problems -- particularly the problems regarding sustainability -- to UNDP's current mandate, which directs UNDP to allocate its resources in Burma only "to programs which meet humanitarian and basic human needs through projects which have a sustainable impact at the grass roots level in the areas of primary health care, the environment, HIV/AIDS, education and food security" and recommends that UNDP expand that mandate to bring it in line with that of other UN agencies in Burma.

4. (C) We basically agree with the assessment. For all its good work, UNDP's program in Burma has basically become a high-cost, low-impact program that is not adequately serving the needs of either donors or its intended recipients. If UNDP continues as it has to date, it will only ensure that its programs reach only a fraction of the rural population with activities whose impact and sustainability will both be strictly limited. To act efficiently and effectively on behalf of Burma's poor, UNDP needs to be able to work on a larger scale with local government officials and national institutions, including representatives of social and economic service ministries, such as the Ministries of Health, Education and Agriculture. Such latitude to work with the GOB's economic and social service ministries will not contribute to the repressive powers of the regime, but will ensure that the social and economic programs that UNDP is seeking to establish in Burma will have the institutional underpinnings to ensure their durability. It will also bring UNDP's mandate in line with the mandates of other UN agencies, like UNICEF (one of Aung San Suu Kyi's favorite organizations), which already works closely and productively with Burma's Health and Education Ministries. That collaboration has not compromised UNICEF's programs in any sense, but has allowed it to support programs of major importance, such as the eradication of polio, which can only

be done on a nationwide basis. Similar flexibility in regard to the implementation of UNDP's program would allow similar results in regard to both the scope and impact of UNDP's rural development programs.

15. (C) That flexibility, however, should be combined with additional responsibilities. If UNDP is to be granted more flexibility to develop more effective and more valuable programs, then the USG should also demand that it play a more effective and forthright role in providing for not only basic human needs, but also basic human rights in Burma. Right now, of all the UN agencies in Burma, only the ILO and UNHCR have joined with ICRC in consistently bringing human rights violations to the attention of the GOB. While several others (notably UNICEF and UNDP) have established relatively widespread programs in Burma (e.g. for UNDP, in Burma's Dry Zone, the Irrawaddy Delta, Shan State and remote border areas of Chin, Kachin and Rakhine States), none have yet been willing to play an effective monitoring, protection and advocacy role on human rights issues. In some cases, this has led to severe criticism of UNDP's programs by groups -- such as Aung San Suu Kyi's National league for Democracy -- which have accused to the UN of turning a blind eye to the regime's abuses. This neglect of human rights issues by the UN agencies has also left day-to-day reporting on human rights issues in the hands of politically motivated groups, often based in Thailand, of varying credibility. The net result has been a situation which benefits no one, least of all the UN agencies.

16. (C) In recent months, the GOB has shown an increased willingness to allow human rights monitoring in sensitive areas throughout Burma by the ILO, the ICRC and UNHCR. The UN, and particularly UNDP, which provides leadership for all UN agencies here, should take advantage of this new flexibility to lay down markers regarding its overriding interest in protecting the basic human rights of Burma's rural poor. We have discussed this with UNDP's outgoing resident coordinator and he believes, as we do, that such human rights monitoring and advocacy work is necessary, and can be done effectively by UNDP and the other UN agencies, given adequate support and direction from the Governing Council and the Executive Board.

17. (C) In short, we are convinced that UNDP needs a more flexible mandate in order to do their job properly in Burma. They should be able to discuss macro-economic issues of key importance to rural populations with the relevant authorities. They should also be able to work with the Burmese social and economic ministries in exactly the fashion that other UN agencies already do. However, we are equally convinced that there is scope and need for greater action in regard to the protection of human rights in all the areas where the UN is active in Burma. From that perspective, we recommend that the US delegate to the upcoming UNDP meeting discuss with UN staff and other Executive Board members the possibility of coupling any plans to increase the flexibility of UNDP's mandate in Burma with an expanded mandate in regard to human rights monitoring and protection activities among Burma's rural population. The UN, as a body, has already recognized its responsibility for human rights in Burma by the appointment of a Special Rapporteur. However, it needs to develop the capacity to carry out those responsibilities at a grass roots level on a day-to-day basis. Making the protection of human rights an integral part of UNDP's mandate in Burma will help meet that need.

Martinez